Looking Back for the Future

The past 20 years have been quite the evolution for the floriculture industry, from the perspective of someone who's been in the middle of it

(Above) Jim Barrett discusses varieties with growers at a National Poinsettia Trials field day. (Inset) Barrett, in the past. See a difference?

By Jim Barrett

GPN started 20 years ago; time does move on. Looking at history is always interesting, and I believe the adage that you study history to avoid making the mistakes of the past. In the case of the floriculture industry, there is a value in looking at our past to help understand how we go through the process of change.

I am pleased to have worked closely with *GPN* for 14 years. My first personal contact with *GPN* was meeting the editor at the time, Elizabeth Keating, at a BPI meeting in San Jose, Calif. Remember BPI (and PPGA)? That organization and its leaders had a major role in expanding the information available to bedding plant growers from the '70s through the mid-'90s. While the need for that organization diminished, its impact is still around. BPI started America in Bloom. Likewise, the Bedding Plant Foundation is one of three foundations that eventually merged into today's American Floral Endowment, whose scholarship program uses the structure that was started by the BPFI group. For myself, learning about communicating with growers and seeing the diversity of production around the country was an important part of helping organize many of those BPI programs.

Floriculture chemical products have evolved greatly during the past 20 years. This photo, from Dr. Barrett's archives, shows a sampling of some of the different growth regulators that he has worked with over the years.

My motivation to work with *GPN* came from a feeling that growers needed a resource for highly technical production information, and I wanted — and still want — those of us in the academic community to have a place to deliver the details of our latest research.

As someone in his 60s (time does pass), I often think that our society makes too many spontaneous decisions and that we are too easily influenced by pure marketing and advertising. As our industry matures, we see the same tendency. And with the naturally tighter margins that come with a mature industry, companies can't afford significant production errors. So while it may not be exciting, pretty or newsy, there is still a place for the trade press to deliver the hard details.

Chemicals

Look at the evolution of pesticides. Whitefly was the significant new problem 20 years ago, and

The National Poinsettia Trials have helped growers understand which new varieties may work for their operations.

we fought it by throwing everything at it as often as we could. Today we are much smarter and have a better understanding of the importance of rotating products for managing disease and insect problems. The chemical companies now even support rotations with their competitors' products so that their own products continue to be effective longer.

While on chemicals, I have to mention PGRs. Whether it has been my work or that of others, *GPN* has certainly been a major vehicle for delivering new information on the use of PGRs. Twenty years ago, Bonzi was new, and Sumagic was still a year from being registered. Our sophistication in the use of PGRs and ability to use stronger chemicals have changed drastically. Much of this credit should go to the chemical companies, who put effort into funding university research and supporting the needs of the industry. Back then, I encouraged ICI and Sandoz (now Syngenta) to open up the Bonzi label for use on all crops, a significant change from the crop-specific labels that were the standard at the time. They took the risk and made the change, and within a few years, the labels for all the other major PGR products had been changed, which give the industry much more flexibility in the use of PGRs. In 1992, Uniroyal, who had a strong focus on the greenhouse market, acquired the rights to develop and market Bonzi, and they drove much of the innovation in the next 10 years. Another significant PGR decision came when OHP acquired Cycocel. I worked with them to update the old Cycocel label, and we added information for tank mixing Cycocel and B-Nine (a competitor's product at the time), a stronger option for growers who were not comfortable spraying Bonzi or Sumagic.

> My motivation to work with *GPN* came from a feeling that growers needed a resource for highly technical production information, and I wanted — and still want — those of us in the academic community to have a place to deliver the details of our latest research.

These are just some examples of where chemical companies made decisions to take risks that eventually benefited the industry. The floriculture industry is a very small niche market in the agricultural chemical world. Our future success is very dependent on the chemical companies continuing to bring new products to market and generating use information. The industry needs to be supportive of those companies who are investing in the long-term success of the industry.

Plants

We can't look back at our industry without looking at the crop and variety changes. By 1990, the plant breeder companies had made significant advances in generating compact seed crops that were much easier to produce as plugs and grow in flats. However, product diversity narrowed, and garden performance suffered. This left an opening in the market for stronger-growing and more diverse varieties, which led to rapid growth of items such as Wave petunias and vegetatively propagated crops, with Proven Winners being at the forefront of the latter. The current trend is to use vegetative varieties with smaller growth habits. I don't think we will soon make the same mistake again, but the industry needs to make sure consumers keep getting a wide range of product forms.

One of the most satisfying developments for me over the past 20 years has been the success of the National Poinsettia Trials. It took a group of breeders and academics two years to work out the details of how to do the trials. For most years, the trials have taken place at Purdue, North Carolina State, the University of Florida and Homewood Nursery in Raleigh, N.C., focused on evaluating new variety introductions. The breeders provide the funding for the trials and support the independent evaluations their varieties receive. *GPN* publishes details from the trials in the February and March issues, and growers benefit from having a better idea of how new varieties perform and which ones might work best for them. The breeders benefit because the introduction of new varieties is much more orderly than a situation where they would have to introduce many more varieties and let the market decide what sticks.

Industry at Large

This final thought is not a production issue, but it will shape the industry in the future. The greenhouse industry has decided multiple times that it is not going to support industry-wide marketing and promotion programs. As good as the America in Bloom concept is, it is very telling that the program is not more widely supported. I am not taking sides in this issue, but an objective view of the current situation is that each individual company must stand on its own merits and compete for its market position in a market that is, at best, flat or growing slowly over time. To some degree, that is the American way, and it's understandable that marketing programs have not been successful. For this industry, however, it means companies will grow by taking market share from the competition, which will put more pressure on mid-size organizations. The successful, prosperous companies will be the ones with the best business leadership, the most resources and the most progressive attitudes.

At heart, I am an information and product-concept guy, and I can't get away from the importance of that. In the future, successful floriculture companies are going to be those that are best at keeping the customer engaged with new information and concepts. That is true, whether the customer is a big box retailer or the end consumer.

***GPN*'s long-time consulting editor Jim Barrett is professor of floriculture at the University of Florida in Gainesville. He can be reached at jbarrett@ufl.edu.**